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Washington, DC - Congresswoman McCollum (MN-04) issued the following opening statement at the "Targeting Girls in the Name of Tradition: Child Marriage" hearing, which was held by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

I would like to thank my friend, Jim McGovern, for holding this hearing on child marriage. Congressman McGovern and the commission's co-chair, Congressman Frank Wolf, are both tireless champions for the rights and dignity of all people.

Of course, this commitment and determination to fight for human rights is in the tradition of Tom Lantos - a friend we all dearly miss - who I had the privilege to know and work with during my years on the International Relations Committee.

Today, we are talking about child marriage or forced marriage which in countries where it is common is often characterized as a traditional practice - just part of the culture.

In fact, child marriage is a harmful traditional practice, it is a human rights violation, and is not a marriage at all but an act of coercion that subjects a child, almost always young girls, to physical, sexual, social, and psychological trauma and abuse.

This is culturally sanctioned exploitation, not marriage. The practice of child marriage must end. Young girls age 10, 11, 12 or 13 are children and regardless of the culture or country they are not capable of voluntarily and freely entering into a marriage with an adult man. These young girls are not only forced to become wives, they are more likely to become the indentured servants and sex slaves with little hope of escaping a fate of poverty and abuse.

There are countries - often regions within countries - where child marriage is epidemic - even when laws exist to protect girls. Cultural and religious traditions at the community level are very strong and the enforcement of laws is very weak.

Every year in countries like Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Nigeria, India, Bangladesh, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia young girls too often get traded like livestock for a bride price, to settle a family

debt, or because there are just too many hungry mouths to feed in a family.

The photo I have here is credited to a brilliant photojournalist - Stephanie Sinclair - who has traveled to Ethiopia, Nepal, and Afghanistan chronicling the lives of young girls in child marriage.

This particular photo is in Afghanistan of an 11 year old girl - Ghulam - and her 40 year old husband to be. Asked by Stephanie how she felt about her upcoming marriage, Ghulam responded, "Nothing. I do not know this man.

Mr. Chairman, an 11 year old should never be anyone's wife, which is why I want child marriage to end. It is my firm belief that girls - all girls - in America, in Ethiopia or in Afghanistan deserve the right to enter adulthood and decide for themselves who their husbands will be. A girl is not a commodity to be traded. She is a precious member of a community who needs to be valued and allowed to grow into adulthood just like any boy.

I have authored legislation - H.R. 2103 - the "International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act" because the U.S. has an interest and an opportunity to ensure girls in the developing world can grow up to be healthy, productive, contributing members of their communities and their country.

Not only do girls deserve the right to choose their future husband, they deserve the opportunity to get an education and contribute their skills and talents to develop their countries.

H.R. 2103 is a bipartisan bill with 103 cosponsors. The legislation is intended to support and expand the successful models already in place for promoting girls education, protecting the human rights of girls, and eliminating the practice of child marriage. The work that is being done to end child marriage has some true champions and I would like to commend UNFPA (United Nations Population Association), UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), ICRW (International Center for Research on Women), CARE, IWHC (International Women's Health Coalition), and the Population Council, along with USAID for their respective commitment and work to empowering girls and protecting their most basic rights.

I am also very pleased that Ambassador Verveer is here to articulate not only the policies, but the actions the Obama Administration is taking to make sure no girl is ever again forced into marriage.

Again, Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum serves on the House Appropriations and Budget Committees.

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